



# Reintegration and Reconciliation in Afghanistan **Time to End the Conflict**

Lieutenant Colonel Mark E. Johnson, U.S. Army

HERE HAS BEEN much discussion as of late about reintegration and reconciliation in Afghanistan and the impact it will have on ending the current conflict.

Reintegration is defined as the operational and tactical level efforts to assimilate insurgents and low- to mid-level commanders peacefully into Afghan society. More specifically, reintegration occurs when individuals or groups of commanders and fighters lay down their arms and inform the Afghan government or the International Security Assistance Forces in Afghanistan (ISAF) of their desire to return to their communities.

Reconciliation, on the other hand, involves higher-level political dialogue with senior commanders of major insurgent groups (e.g., the Taliban). The goal of these efforts is to persuade insurgent leaders and groups to terminate their armed resistance and assume a legitimate role in the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA).

Reintegration and reconciliation are a part of the natural cycle of armed conflict. Eventually, insurgents grow weary of fighting, and only the most extreme elements see no end to war. As happened in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Cambodia, Somalia, and the Philippines, Afghanistan now faces the challenge of how to reintegrate and reconcile with the enemies it has been fighting over the last nine years.

## Peace and National Reconciliation

In his inaugural address on 19 November 2009, President Hamid Karzai declared peace and national reconciliation one of Afghanistan's top priorities. He said not all insurgents are ideologically motivated, and many are driven by personal and tribal grievances, lack of employment opportunities, and an inability to provide for and protect their families. What he did not mention is that many of the insurgents (and noninsurgents) are also disillusioned with his government's ability to provide basic needs such as long-term employment, schools, hospitals, and a justice system. Many view the GIRoA as ineffective and corrupt, and, in many cases, see a viable alternative in the Taliban. The

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*PHOTO: Haji Sattar, the deputy governor of Helmand Province, Afghanistan (second from right), hands an AK-47 rifle to LTC Haji Mohammad, the battalion commander of the Afghan National Army's 2d Kandak, 2d Brigade, 215th Corps, during a reintegration ceremony at Forward Operating Base Sher Wali, Marjah, Helmand Province, Afghanistan. The rifle was originally passed from the former Taliban fighter (second from left) to symbolize him giving up his arms and rejoining the community. At the event, five other individuals were also reintegrated into Afghan society. (USMC photo by LCpl Tommy Bellegarde)*

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Afghan people are tired of conflict and do not really care who provides them opportunity, security, and justice, as long as they can live and raise their children in peace, without fear of being maimed by an insurgent-emplaced roadside bomb or killed in an “escalation of force” incident because they were driving too close to a coalition convoy.

**Reconciliation.** Both President Karzai and the Afghan people understand all too well that the time has come to put an end to armed conflict and reconcile and reintegrate with their “sad and upset brothers.” Combined military counterinsurgency operations can assist in setting the conditions for sustainable security, the installation of good government leaders, and the implementation of long-term development programs, but they will not end the conflict. The war in Afghanistan will come to a successful conclusion only when senior level Taliban commanders are reconciled and their fighters return home to their communities.

For the best chance of success, the program needs to build on a community-based approach that reintegrates insurgents at the lowest level, utilizing Afghanistan’s tradition of conflict resolution by local shuras (groups of village elders) including tribal and religious leaders. At the village and community level the elders have to decide whether to accept an insurgent back into the community. If a community’s elders refuse to take the insurgent back, the Ministry of Interior will need to assume responsibility for the insurgent and move him to a central reintegration facility where he can receive religious and de-radicalization training until another community can be found.

**Steps for reintegration.** When a community accepts an insurgent back, various steps occur. First, the community elders, the Ministry of Interior, the National Directorate of Security, the Ministry of Defense and, when requested, the ISAF will have to screen, interview, and collect biometric

data. Once processed, the insurgent will be issued an identification card, connected with his family, and provided safe housing and a way to feed himself and his family. Initially, the Ministry of Interior will likely collect the insurgent’s weapons and then determine at a later date whether the insurgent will be allowed to continue to possess a personal weapon according to Afghan gun laws. If he is on a coalition targeting list, it will also be important that coalition forces are notified so that the insurgent’s name can be temporarily moved to a restricted targeting list while he is in the process of reintegration. If successfully reintegrated and determined to no longer pose a threat to coalition forces, the insurgent could eventually be removed from all coalition targeting lists.

**Avoiding resentment.** In order not to create a “prodigal son” situation, in which resentment grows among community residents who chose to stay and not fight against the government while the insurgent is welcomed back with open arms and no repercussions, the focus of support should be on the community, not the insurgent. The community receives the immediate cash-for-work programs and long-term development projects not only on behalf of the reintegrating fighter, but also on behalf of the community as a whole. In short, the community rather than the insurgent is rewarded for accepting the insurgent back.

Under the auspices of a local defense initiative, many of these fighters might even be eligible to serve in a community defense force supervised and trained by the Ministry of Interior. This force would not supplant but augment the local police force, especially in areas where no large Afghan National Police or Army presence exists. Most of these fighters do not reintegrate because they have an epiphany and decide that the Afghan government is not so bad after all. In reality, most return because they feel they have a better chance of protecting

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their personal interests, villages, and families by working with the Afghan government than fighting against it. With this type of motivation, there is no better candidate to form a local defense force as long as he can be trusted, trained, and closely supervised. In the end, the insurgents get one chance at reintegration or reconciliation. If they return to raise arms against the government that accepted them back, then they will be eliminated.

**Responsibility of community elders.** Much responsibility falls on the community elders, the foundation of Afghan society; however, much responsibility also rests with the Afghan district, provincial, and national leaders and the international community. The insurgents provide security, employment opportunities, and fair, timely justice to their supporters; the Afghan government still struggles with these. To counter “shadow governments,” reintegration must be closely linked to long-term economic development and social programs focused on communities that accept fighters wishing to reintegrate. These programs should take the form of vocational training in such fields as reforestation, agriculture, and public works. Insurgent skills and community needs will determine programs that contribute to building a sustainable local economy.

## Challenges

Several challenges have to be confronted to succeed with reconciliation and reintegration.

**Top-down structure.** Although the GIRoA’s National Peace and Reintegration draft program includes many facets of a community-based approach, to expedite the program the central government will use existing structures. This use is of some concern because the current structures do not allow for key ministerial representation below the provincial level. Without key ministerial representation at the district level, village elders and community leaders will struggle to obtain the required resources from the Ministry of Interior and the National Directorate of Security for background checks, biometric data collection, weapons collection, and interviewing. A centrally run, top-down national reintegration program will falter.

The strength of Afghanistan is its population and local leaders. Reintegration must be a bottom-up process where the local leaders and the lowest

level of government (districts) have the resources in personnel and funds to make decisions on the ground and reintegrate. As there are over 300 districts in Afghanistan, it is not possible to resource all districts with the required resources. However, key districts where reintegration is either occurring or expected to occur should receive resources first. Just to say there are too many districts is not the answer. For reintegration to work, the proper community-based structure must be in place along with authorities who speak on behalf of the Afghan government.

On the other hand, due to the high level and type of discussions with senior commanders seeking political roles or positions in the government, reconciliation belongs at the provincial, regional, and national level where these negotiations and decisions are best made.

**Funding.** Although many countries (e.g., United States, Japan, and United Kingdom) have promised millions of dollars, there is still a lack of funding for reintegration and reconciliation. The UN Development Program that played a major role in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of illegally armed groups does not have the funds to support reintegration and reconciliation. Commander Emergency Relief Program (CERP)



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Haji Sattar, the deputy governor of Helmand Province, Afghanistan, speaks to a crowd of Afghan locals during a reintegration shura at Forward Operating Base Sher Wali, Marjah, Helmand Province, Afghanistan, 23 June 2010. During the event, six Marjah locals with former connections to the Taliban were reintegrated back into society.

monies can assist communities reintegrating former fighters with cash-for-work programs, but cannot support long-term development projects that keep former enemies in the community and off the battlefield.

In the 2010 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) Provisions for Iraq and Afghanistan, and Pakistan (section 1222), the Secretary of Defense, in consultation with the Secretary of State and in coordination with the GIRoA, has the authority to apply CERP funds to support reintegration. However, little initial guidance was provided in the NDAA concerning how to manage these funds and use them in the field. Some of these issues have been resolved, and CERP funding is now having a greater impact, which, along with other national direct funding, will continue to be the primary source of funding for reintegration until the promised monies from donor countries are committed.

**Foreign interests.** The future of Afghanistan has regional and political implications for Tehran, Moscow, London, Washington, Islamabad, and New Delhi. Some countries fear that if reintegration and, especially, reconciliation occur too quickly and with the wrong leaders, much of what we have gained over the last nine years will be lost. Most acknowledge that reintegration and reconciliation are inevitable, but the program must be carefully crafted and not extended to all. Afghanistan has made far too many strides in women's rights, for example, to see this progress truncated by the reintroduction of the Taliban into local communities and government positions.

**Local militias.** With the reintegration and reconciliation of commanders and fighters, another real concern is that many of them will simply walk away from the insurgency under the guise of reintegration and form local militias to protect their families and villages or to exact revenge on

their rivals. Just because an insurgent chooses to stop fighting against the GIRoA and reintegrate or reconcile does not mean that he trusts and believes in the government any more than he did when he fought against it. In fact, in many parts of the country, deep mistrust of the government and especially of the Afghan National Police and local police force still exists. If the GIRoA cannot provide honest, trustworthy leaders at the local government level and the necessary security to improve the daily lives of the Afghan people, then local militias will fill the void.

**Opportunism.** As with any program that involves large sums of money, the risk exists that communities will collude with insurgents to take advantage of the Afghan government. There is little to stop a community from welcoming back insurgents only for the purpose of receiving additional assistance from the GIRoA and the international community. In fact, a real danger is that the program could even inadvertently create more insurgents in the short-term by encouraging communities to send residents to engage coalition forces for a limited period of time and then return for the benefit of the community. International community oversight of the funding and the communities accepting reintegrees will be imperative.

**Insurgents get a vote.** Many Afghans are still not convinced reintegration and reconciliation will bring an end to fighting and do not believe the program will have an impact at all. Even among the insurgent groups, there is no consensus or great desire to reintegrate and reconcile. Al-Qaeda and Haqqani are likely to oppose and undermine any attempt at reintegration and reconciliation. Al-Qaeda senior leaders know they will never be offered reconciliation, and they have no interest in joining a government supported by the West. Haqqani likewise will not support reintegration

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and reconciliation because it wants to replace the current government, not be a part of it. Perhaps if promised key positions in the government they could be enticed. The Taliban, Hezb-e-Islami, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan—especially the low- to mid-level commanders and fighters—will likely be more flexible and negotiate their return to their communities. If truly seen as an Afghan-led program without over-involvement from coalition forces or the international community, the majority of the insurgents who have families, business interests, and ties to their tribes and communities are likely to return. Conditions must allow for an honorable return with some prospects of a better life.

## Conclusion

The international community and the Afghan government understand the importance of a successful reintegration and reconciliation program. That is why so much time and effort have been spent over the last year in developing a sustainable program that does not over-promise, but offers enough in the way of security, governance, and

development to convince insurgent commanders and fighters tired of fighting to return home.

Despite the challenges that the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program faces, there is great hope, if structured and funded properly, that the program will assist in ending the conflict. Ultimately, with or without a coherent program, reintegration and even reconciliation will continue to occur at the district and community levels. Even today, fighters are coming home from the battlefield to spend time with their families and take a break. Unfortunately, many, finding nothing more at home than before they left, return to the fight.

The goal of the National Peace and Reintegration Program is to give these insurgents a way to be formally accepted back into the community and the Afghan government. The GIRQA has a lot of work to do to convince them to trust it. A well formulated, well communicated National Peace and Reintegration Program that provides tangible results will provide the framework on which to build this trust and end the conflict. **MR**



U.S. Marine Corps, Lance Cpl. Justin D. Loya

**Al Haj Mullawee Mohammad Zarif, center right, speaks at a reintegration shura hosted by 3d Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment, Regimental Combat Team 7, at Forward Operating Base Marjah, Afghanistan, 23 June 2010. The U.S. Marines held the shura to release prisoners who took an oath to put down arms and re-enter society as law-abiding citizens.**